

Interview Summary

Interview: Lt. Robert Kornexl
Time/Date: December 15, 2004
Location: Air Station Kodiak
Present: Commander Karl Baldessari, Scott Erickson

During the interview, Lt. Kornexl provided the following information:

Lt. Kornexl reported that he was the copilot on CG6513, seated in the left seat. He is aircraft commander qualified, and is an instructor pilot. He said he knew that throughout the day, there were discussions between the ALEX HALEY, other tug vessels, and the master of the Selendang Ayu about trying to get a towline to the vessel. He said that given the ALEX HALEY weighed about 30 tons, and the Selendang Ayu weighed about 400 tons, he knew the tow line would not hold, and it ultimately snapped. He also knew that the ALEX HALEY was trying to convince the master of the vessel to remove all personnel, but the master was uncooperative. The ALEX HALEY negotiated the removal of 18 crewmembers.

During the afternoon of the accident, Lt. Kornexl said the sea conditions kept the ALEX HALEY out of helicopter launch limits. He knew that the master of the vessel was attempting to get an anchor line out, which ultimately happened, and appeared to stabilize the vessel. CG6020 and CG6021 came on-scene, with CG6020 removing 9 crewmembers and transferring them to the ALEX HALEY. CG6021 removed 9 additional crewmembers, put them on the beach, and then orbited for a short time before landing on the beach to remain on-scene as long as possible. CG6020 picked up the nine crewmembers from the beach and departed for Dutch Harbor. CG6021 was sent to Cold Bay. The ALEX HALEY operations staff had contingency discussions with the crew of CG6513 to remove the last eight crewmembers. An option to deliver eight survival suits to the vessel were discussed, but were not acted on. Lt. Kornexl said that the ALEX HALEY staff would have the details of those discussions.

Once the anchor line was deployed from the Selendang Ayu, it appeared to be holding its position, and the crew of CG6513 decided to have dinner, about 1715 to 1730. During their meal, the ALEX HALEY's operations officer walked in and asked, "can you get off" (the helideck). The crew answered, "yes." The crew began to prepare to depart. Lt. Kornexl said the ship's aviation launch crew expressed concerns about the ability to launch, but he told them the launch decision was legal, there was a visible horizon, the vessel is hard aground, eight crewmembers need help, and they had the expectation that the crew of CG6513 was that help. A "heavy weather" rollout procedure was briefed with the ALEX HALEY deck crew, which involved using tie down chains to consecutively move the helicopter onto the helideck. The crew had training in this procedure, but had not trained this procedure on the ALEX HALEY, and they knew it would take a long time to accomplish the rollout.

The crew of CG6513 decided to have the ALEX HALEY turn down swell, and do a normal helo rollout. This was accomplished and CG6513 was tied down on the helideck. The helicopter was lightened by removing all unnecessary equipment. The helicopter was started and the ALEX HALEY turned back into the wind. Lt. Kornexl knew they were at their launch limits, with occasional excursions over the limits, but he said the risk was justified to save lives. The takeoff from the ALEX HALEY was fine after release of the TALON, and the helicopter literally popped off the helideck. Once airborne, they heard CG6020 inbound, which arrived shortly after CG6513 arrived over the grounded vessel. The crews discussed the possibility that CG6513 could hoist some, but not all of the vessel crewmembers, but everyone ultimately decided that CG6020 could do the hoisting.

CG6020 moved into position to begin hoisting near the bow. CG6513 took up a 200-foot hover, about 100 yards behind, and about 100 feet above CG6020. Lt. Kornexl said the time of day was dusk, with enough illumination that one could easily film. Their helicopter's searchlights were on. He remembered seeing the rescue basket on the deck of the vessel, but no one approached. The rescue swimmer from CG6020 was sent down to the vessel. Waves were striking the bow of the vessel, and the rescue swimmer was knocked down. As the hoisting was proceeding, Lt. Kornexl recalled seeing a large wave hit the bow of the vessel, and spray from the wave hit CG6020. He commented, "that was amazing." He then saw a large wave break over the top of the bow, which engulfed CG6020. He said the entire fuselage disappeared in water, not just spray, as if the wave broke on CG6020. He said he saw CG6020's rotor system decelerate, and the main rotor blades coned upward. The helicopter moved slightly forward and then downward. The main rotor blades hit the rail of the vessel, and the tail rotor hit the side of the vessel and then broke off. CG6020 then hit the water.

The crew of CG6513 went into rescue mode. The pilot moved into position to hoist from about 150 feet, in visible conditions. Lt. Kornexl said he could not see anyone in the water, and did not see CG6020 roll inverted. The flight mechanic began hoisting and brought up Lt. Neel. The second person was someone in a drysuit. During the third hoist, which took more time than the first two, a person was trying to assist someone else in the water. When the third hoist finally came up, it was Lt. Watson. Lt. Kornexl learned there were five targets in the water, but he did not know where the rescue swimmer was. Someone in the crew mentioned there were two more people in the water. The flight mechanic reported that one person could not get into the rescue basket. He coned the helicopter to try and scoop the person, who became entangled near the basket. The flight mechanic tried to let out and take in slack in the hoist line, and inquired if he should retrieve the basket. The answer was, "yes, you've got to bring him up." The flight mechanic retrieved the hoist cable with the person tangled and was not sure if he was retrieving a full or partial body, and he commented that he thought the person may be burned.

Once the basket was retrieved, they realized the person was covered in oil, and was actually steaming in the cold air. The survivor was placed on the floor of the helicopter and then he made a movement. That was then the crew realized the survivor was alive. The crew of CG6513 continued to search, but the 5th target previously seen, was no longer visible. The crew considered the condition of the 4th

survivor and the helicopter's fuel status, and initially decided to land on the ALEX HALEY, but they knew the landing would be difficult. The flight mechanic commented that the survivor needed immediate hospital care, and the decision was made to head for Dutch Harbor.

When CG6513 reached Dutch Harbor, the aircraft was met by a medical team. The helicopter was shutdown and refueled. Lt. Eason contacted Coast Guard District personnel who informed them the ALEX HALEY needed them to return as soon as possible. The crew of CG6513 did not know at that time that the Selendang Ayu had broken in half. After launch from Dutch Harbor, the crew proceeded back to the vessel, and established communications with the rescue swimmer from CG6020, who also turned on his strobe light. The crew located 2 persons near the bow of the vessel, but did not see any persons in the water. They decided to conduct a hoist from a high hover. Waves were breaking over the bow of the vessel producing spray in the air. The flight mechanic tried to get the rescue basket down to the bow area, but it proved to be difficult hoisting conditions. The rescue basket was sailing quite far downwind, and the mechanic was concerned it would get tangled, and he would have to shear the cable. The hoisting position near the bow placed the helicopter at a hover over the water, to the left front of the bow. The pilot had no visual reference because of darkness, no horizon, and passing snow squalls.

The crew of CG6513 got the rescue swimmer to move aft, and the flight mechanic was able to get the rescue basket on-deck. Since the helicopter was now further aft, the pilot was able to hold his position via visual reference on the vessel and had more structure ahead of him to sight on. It took about 45 to 60 minutes to complete the 2 hoists from the vessel. The helicopter crew then made two more searches of the shoreline from about 200 feet and about 40 knots, using searchlights and night vision goggles, but located no persons. The second sweep was partially obscured by a passing snow squall. The crew was constantly worried about icing conditions, and decided to return to Dutch Harbor. The ALEX HALEY asked if they could return, but the crew decided that the weather conditions were too extreme.

Lt. Kornexl reported that he accrued about 2,000 hours of helicopter flight time while in the U.S. Army. He joined the Coast Guard in August, 1998, and had accrued about 1,700 hours in an HH-65. He was stationed in Alaska in June, 2002, and was on his 5th deployment in Alaska.